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9 August 1978

IRAN: A Political Assessment

The Shah in his annual Constitution day speech on 5 August committed his government to free parliamentary elections next year and promised that "everyone may vote and his vote will be counted." He challenged those who did not like his rule to "test themselves at the ballot box." Prime Minister Amuzegar had said earlier that anyone could run for parliament and that groups other than the Rastakhiz Party could field candidates, a marked change from the government's earlier stance that the quasi-official Rastakhiz was the only vehicle for legitimate political activity.

This step has not been forced on the Shah by events but rather seems to be part of his deliberate timetable for developing the kind of Iran that he envisages. Over the years he has insisted that he would permit free political activity when he thought the people were ready for it and when Iran had reached a sufficient level of economic development. He almost certainly will follow through on his promise to try to hold free elections. Enough momentum has been developed by his announcement that reneging would be difficult--and perhaps dangerous. The major question is whether the elections will indeed be free or rigged as in the past.

Promises of free elections have long been part of the pre-electoral rhetoric in Iran. There have been no unmanipulated elections for nearly 70 years, however, and at that time the vote was limited to certain classes of society. Since World War II a clear progression can be seen. First, a combination of local forces selected the winner in each constituency, then the power moved to Tehran where the Shah, security officials and the prime minister played key roles in choosing the parliamentary deputies. At both stages there was considerable politicking and horse trading. In more recent elections there has been a free electoral choice permitted among several approved candidates from each constituency.

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The Shah is taking a calculated risk. Just as his more liberal approach to dissent in the last two years has resulted in violent demonstrations by those hoping to force more concessions from him, so the promise of free elections is likely to produce new political ferment.

Some activity will develop in the "silent majority," those who have refrained from any political activity because of the Shah's tight control. Most will probably come from those already active:

- the Rastakhiz Party, whose organization and promise of patronage will give it an edge in any election;
- the nationalists, spiritual descendents of Mos-sadeq's National Front, who will have a large following among the intellectuals;
- the religious community, which has a large mass following.

The nationalists and the religious groups will cause most of the problems. Neither has a coherent program. Their major demand has been for a reduction in the predominant role of the Shah; some would like him to be only a figure-head, others want him deposed. The Shah made it clear in his speech that neither the monarchy nor the Islamic religion could be challenged. Both are provided for in the constitution that he is sworn to uphold. Although the status of Islam has not been in question, the Shah seems to be warning the religious community that one pillar of the constitution--the monarchy--cannot be attacked without endangering the other.

A substantial part of the opposition--and even some of his supporters--will see the Shah's move as having been forced upon him by US pressure and therefore a sign of weakness. The opposition will be alert for any sign that the attempt by the Shah intends to retreat in any way from his promise. More effort probably will be spent in attacking the Shah than in producing a constructive program. His supporters will worry that he is losing his grip and will be looking for some way to secure their position when the Shah can no longer be depended upon for protection.

The Shah is depending on the strength of his own position and on new laws governing press freedom and right of

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assembly to provide a relatively peaceful atmosphere during the pre-electoral maneuvering. His success will ultimately depend on the willingness of a generally irresponsible opposition to forgo violence in exchange for a legal political role. For the mass of the population the idea of a truly free election will be as strange as the idea of a constitution was to their grandfathers.

The next year in Iran could, like 1906, 1941 and 1953, be a turning point in Iranian history. Sinbad, the Persian who let the genie out of the bottle, was never the same afterwards.

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